SELF-CONTROL EAST AND WEST:

IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND PERSONAL GROWTH

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In the ancient Indian text, the Bhaghavad Gita, the man (sic:person) of wisdom is described as "One who has not a hair's breadth between will and action--Who sees action in inaction and inaction in action, he is enlightened among men--He does all actions disciplined." How does the person of enlightenment gain this discipline? And how, as counselors and educators, can we encourage the pursuit of this discipline in children? In this article we will explore visions of self-control (the "discipline" referred to in the Bhagavad Gita), the skills for attaining self-control, and ideas about how they might be applied both personally and professionally.

There has long been a concern that our increasingly mechanized and technological society may deprive individuals of a sense of control over their own lives. Many writers have eloquently identified the adverse consequences to the individual of a society preoccupied with productivity and material consumption, and have poetically illustrated the sense of alienation, isolation, and loneliness that may result. All of us are aware that these aversive consequences afflict not only adults, but adolescents and even young children as well. Increased crime rates among juveniles, increased reliance on psychotropic chemicals and alcohol to induce altered states of consciousness are evidence of a society in which its youth is too often bereft of meaning and sense of purpose.

But where do we turn to rediscover values of a personal, interpersonal, and even spiritual nature? How can we learn the skills necessary to regain control over our own lives, and the skills to help children feel more in control of their lives? As a partial response to these questions, a new model, a new vision of our human potential is necessary. Some aspects of this vision may come from

the Eastern esoteric and mystical tradition; others may come from our Western scientific research laboratories and field experiments. Parents, teachers, and educators are in a pivotal position to transmit aspects of this vision to future generations, to offer them a vision of an "enlightened" life, and to teach them the skills of self-control to implement such a life.

Visions of Self-Control

There are two visions of self-control which we are going to discuss, one which comes primarily from our Western tradition and one which comes primarily from the Eastern tradition. Further, each of these traditions has developed certain sets of skill training which enable individuals to attain the qualities inherent in its vision. The teachings of Zen and the Eastern traditions in general have emphasized techniques which encourage individuals to yield, let go, develop egolessness, non-attachment, present-centeredness and altered states of consciousness. A dominant emphasis in Western behavioral psychology has been the precision use of the intellect and rationality, the setting of goals, self and environmental analysis, assertiveness, strong ego development, the search for causality, and the perfection of ordinary awareness.

Both Eastern and Western traditions have certain blinders which encourage them to believe that their vision is the only "true" reality. Thus problems of dogmatism and methodological purity occur in both traditions. We believe that a more flexible, pragmatic approach is needed, one which involves combining the best of both traditions to arrive at a truly comprehensive approach to realizing our human potential.

Western Goals

Unless we decide to retreat to a cave in the Himalayas, we live in the ways of the world, and we must learn certain skills to survive. We need to learn how to set goals for ourselves, how to interact effectively with others, how to interpret and abide by the mores and customs of our society, how to respond appropriately to feedback from our environment. As educators, we also have a responsibility to teach these skills to our children; to reinforce them systematically for specific skills they have learned; and to socialize them to the importance of both assertion and accomodation. All these skills are examples of the precise awareness involved in behavioral self-management skills (Shapiro, D., 1978; Thoresen and Mahoney, 1974).

Eastern Skills

However, we need to learn more, both for ourselves and in our roles as models and educators of the young. We need to learn how to avoid becoming trapped by the goals we have set for ourselves, or by the goals society sets for us. Although future planning may be important and fucntional, it is also important to know how to value the spontaneity and joyfulness of the present moment--the smile of our child, the wind blowing a leaf to the ground, an ant crawling. Feedback is important for learning, but analyzing, categorizing, and labeling may inhibit direct experience. We need to learn how to let go of the security of labels, the security of ordinary ways of perceiving reality, and trust the "flow of the river" although we don't know where it leads. We need to learn to respond to ourselves and the children we work with in totally nonjudgmental, totally accepting ways for no reason, for no accomplishments--

except that they are, that we are. All these skills are examples of the global, non-precise nirvana awareness that may be achieved with meditation.

Integration

What we would like to suggest is that neither of the above visions of the world represents a "true" reality, neither is higher or better than the other. Neither meditation nor behavioral self-management skills provides a final answer. Rather, both are necessary. Therefore, we need to learn a precision nirvana, a non-doctrinnaire model for enhancing our own personal growth and that of children to whom we have both professional or personal commitments. Precision nirvana as conceptualized here consists of three aspects: 1) the skills of applying ordinary awareness in self-management strategies; 2) the skills of applying altered states in meditative strategies; and 3) the ability to know intuitively and accurately when which mode of awareness is called for (Shapiro and Zifferblatt, 1976; Shapiro, 1978).

By being able to use both modes, we learn to be master of both. Through knowledge of both Eastern and Western modes, we may learn to maintain a perspective on ourselves when we act in the ways of the world. We know how to set goals, but do not feel enslaved by them; we use feedback and evaluation as a means of learning, but do not forget direct experience; we give precise reinforcement to optimize performance and skill learning, yet we also are able to give the big noncontingent cuddle. We learn to discriminate which situations cause us self-consciousness, which situations make us joyful, and simultaneously we learn to let go, relax, and simply accept

negative and positive feelings. We may strive for the goal of excellence, yet we learn to see perfection as a playful game of becoming.

Skills for Self-Control

The Chinese word for education, or learning, consists of two characters. One character is the character for nose, which, in the East, refers to the "self." The other character represents "wings." Education,to the Chinese, means to have the self soar, to learn to transcend the limits of our fate and our environment. Before we can do so, however, we have to become aware of how we are controlled by our blinders about reality. This realization of our current "determinism" is the first step in learning to develop true personal freedom. When B. F. Skinner (1972) talks of going "beyond freedom," he means that, as long as we live with the illusion that we have freedom, we may fail to develop an awareness of the things that are in fact influencing our lives and thus we may never attain true freedom. As Nusudran, the wise fool in many Sufi stories has pointed out, our perception of reality, though it may appear natural, is merely a perception. We can see from the early research of Asch (1958) the enormous effect that the social environment (peer pressure) has on our actions. Research by Adams and Biddle (1970) and Sommer (1969) suggests the physical environment has a significant effect; for example, the arrangement of a classroom plays a role in determining which students speak and which don't--regardless of the students' ability. Other research suggests that the internal environment (i.e., the kinds of things we say to ourselves; our hopes, our expectations, our hurts, our concerns) also influences our

actions--from the intensity of our depression, or effectiveness in approaching other people, to the amount of creativity and risk taking behavior we engage in. Until we become aware of how we are conditioned, we will continue to believe in an illusion of freedom.

What we are suggesting, therefore, is that to obtain a true freedom, we need skills for greater awareness--both behavioral self-observation skills to be more precise about everyday reality, as well as meditative skills, to be more "holistic" in our perception of the world.

Awareness

Behavioral Self-Observation Behavioral self-management strategies involve a precise method for attaining awareness of the relationship between environment and our own behavior. This method, behavioral self-observation, consists of performing a careful analysis of the relationship between our actions, thoughts, and feelings, and the environment in which we live. Often this process is referred to as the ABCs of self-observation: antecedents, behavior, and consequences. Thus, behavioral self-observation involves looking at the behavior in question (e.g., negative self-thoughts, depression, binge eating), its antecedents (when does it occur, who is present), and its consequences (i.e., what changes as a result of the behavior). Through this process, it is possible to identify environmental antecedents to behavior, as well as environmental consequences. This functional analysis of behavior, which can be used even with quite young children, is an effective means of allowing a child to discover for him or herself that behavior, thoughts, and feelings

do not exist independently in the world, but are greatly influenced by the cognitive, social, and physical environment.

Meditation Another method for gaining sensitivity to our internal and external evnironments is the Eastern technique of meditation. Meditation involves an attempt to focus attention in a non-analytical, non-evaluative way. Depending on the type of meditation, the practitioner is instructed either to focus on a particular object (a flower, a picture, a rock) or to maintain an open, mindful awareness (Goleman, 1977; Naranjo and Ornstein, 1971; Shapiro, D, 1978). For example, in breath meditation, an individual is instructed to focus on breathing. When thoughts, anxieties, or distractions arise during practice of meditation, the practitioner is instructed to look at them with equanimity and then let them "flow down the river." Thus, meditation encourages a here-and-now awareness, without evaluation, without analyzing cause and effect, without goal-setting. By instructing young children in brief focused "breathing" exercises, it is possible to teach them centering and relaxation skills, as well as sensitivity to their thoughts and bodily cues.

Choosing a Vision: Goal-Setting Thus, the first skill of the integrative model of self-control proposed here is the ability to be aware, through the precise awareness of behavioral self-observation and the global awareness of meditation, of how various internal and external environmental stimuli influence one's life. Once we have developed this awareness, we can begin to choose how we want to live. This potential for choice frees us from past habit patterns,

past reflex emotions, and past or current environmental situations. Gaining awareness of our past conditioning gives us an opportunity to evaluate our past habits and choose new ways of acting. Thus, the second skill of this integrative model is the ability to set goals, to choose a personal vision of growth and health. Goal-setting can occur through Western strategies of systematic decision-making and self-evaluation; focusing on where we are currently and where we would like to be as we look to the future. Often, too, meditative strategies can influence our goal setting process by making us more accepting of who we are now, and by giving us a holistic, intuitive vision of our place in the world.

Implementation of Goals: East and West Once having set self-change goals, we need to know how to implement them. The behavioral self-management techniques relevant to this aim may be divided into two groupings (Thoresen and Mahoney, 1974).

The first is referred to as environmental planning (stimulus or cue control). Environmental planning means changing the environment in such a way that it facilitates our acting in the ways in which we want to act. This environmental planning is done prior to the occurrence of the target behavior (the behavior to be changed). For example, if we are trying to reduce our weight we may put only healthy foods in the refrigerator and cupboards, put a weight chart on the kitchen cabinet with a warning of the dangers about being overweight, etc. All these actions occur before we eat, and are examples of environmental planning.

The second strategy is behavioral programming. This self-management intervention takes place after the occurrence of the target behavior, and involves focusing on the kinds of consequences which

result from a particular action. Behavioral programming may refer to either self-punishment or self-reward of a symbolic, verbal, or material nature depending on whether the behavior in question needs to be encouraged or reduced in frequency.

For example, when we perform an action we admire do we praise ourselves for it? If so, what kind of praise? Is it a verbal pat on the back? A visit to a concert we wanted to attend? The purchase of a new item of clothing? If we don't perform as we would like, do we punish ourselves? If so, what kind of punishment (e.g., giving a dollar to our most hated charity)? Both environmental planning and behavioral programming are effective strategies in helping individual make self-directed behavior change.

However, as already noted, in addition to teaching ourselves and our children how to achieve goals, we must also develop the Eastern skills of non-attachment and acceptance of both success and failure. This acceptance is a critical component of any effort at personal growth, and may be accomplished through the practice of meditation. Research has shown that meditation is an effective strategy in teaching relaxation to children, as well as in improving empathy in counselors (Lesh, 1976).

Although there are many different types of meditation techniques, and although there are psychophysiological differences which occur during different types of meditative practices (e.g., Kasamatsu and Hirai, 1966; Anand, et al., 1961), a recent review of the clinical literature suggests there are really not yet any convincing differences between the effects of techniques (Shapiro and Giber, 1978). Each "camp" attempts to suggest that theirs may be the unique and only way. As yet, however, there are no data to support

this (Shapiro and Walsh, 1979).

Additional Considerations

In applying this integrative model of self-control strategies several caveats need to be raised. First, it is important to note that not every self-control technique works for every person. We are all--children and adults alike--unique individuals.

For example, for individuals who have a higher internal locus of control, meditation and self-management strategies may work quite well both for adults (Beiman, et al., 1979) and for children (Bugental, et al., 1977). However, children who are more externally oriented seem to respond better,at least initially, to external management strategies.* Further, just because an individual is attracted to a technique doesn't necessarily mean it is therapeutically beneficial for him or her.

For example, individuals who are shy and withdrawn or chronically de pressed may be attracted to the technique of meditation. However, we do not believe they should be given meditation alone as a treatment technique or an intervention strategy. Rather, these individuals should have social skill training, to learn goal setting, to learn to evaluate what are the causes of their unahppiness. On the other hand, individuals who are chronically overcommitted, time pressured, set too many goals, have too high and unrealistic standards for themselves may be attracted to "goal-setting" techniques. Yet, it may be important to teach these people the skills of relaxation,

* It should be noted that there is a paradox with any kind of self-management strategy. Usually, at least in the beginning, there is a teacher who teaches the self-management strategy, who teaches someone else to have self-control. Although paradoxical, this is crucial. How we teach techniques to others--the gentleness, the reinforcement, the accepting non-judgmentalness of our approach--is a critical determinant of how willing and able others are to learn these skills.

letting go, learning to live in the here and now. We need to gather more information about which self-control strategies are best suited to which individual under what conditions (Shapiro, D., 1980, in prep.).

Second, the issue of individual responsibility needs to be addressed. Counselors and educators can set a context for teaching others self-management skills. However, the individual must be willing to practice the technique. No matter how gentle and accepting we may be, no matter how powerful and effective the technique may be, we can't make another person practice them. They have to be willing to assume that responsibility for their own lives (Shapiro and Shapiro, 1979).

Finally, two comments related to the sex-role literature are in order. First, at this point in the state of our "self-control" art, certain sex-role related considerations may be necessary in the application of self-management strategies. For example, certain psychologists have suggested that there are important issues in the use of behavioral self-management strategies with women (Krumboltz and Shapiro, 1979; Shapiro, 1980, in prep.). A second issue relates to our personal "vision" and its relationship to sex roles. What we are suggesting is that both adults and children can develop a personal vision (and the skills to reach that vision) which includes both traditional male (assertive, independent) and the female (nurturing, expressive) qualities. This combination of male plus female qualities has been referred to as androgyny (Bem, 1974). However, we believe our model of psychological health transcends an androgynous model. We believe there are other values--joy, humor,

spontaneity, that do not fall into either a "male" or a "female" camp, but which are part of the vision of being fully healthy and fully human (Shapiro and Shapiro, 1979).

Summary

Considerations of psychological health and well-being were discussed from both and Eastern and Western perspective. Issues involved in the development of a personal vision were offered, as well as a discussion of the self-control strategies needed to reach that vision. Additional considerations of responsbility, motivation, and sex-role issues were mentioned. It was suggested that true health, wellness, can only come when individuals can gain the skills for developing personal freedom. These skills involve both the ability to develop precise awareness, analyze cause and effect, set goals, develop a strong sense of self, be assertive, and the skills to develop a "holistic awareness," let go, yield, and be more gentle and accepting both with ourselves and with others.

Editors: Note: For a more detailed account of practical, step-by-step instructions for practicing the techniques of meditation and behavioral self-management, and explaining in more depth both the Eastern and Western visions of health and growth, readers are referred to Dr. Shapiro's recent book, Precision Nirvana, Prentice-Hall (1978).

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